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Espionage Is an Old, Old National Custom

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WASHINGTON (AP) — It's as old as man.

The House demanded to know about the secret use of government funds in foreign affairs. The President refused to explain. This wasn't President Lyndon B. Johnson. It was President James K. Polk 121 years ago.

Now the Central Intelligence Agency is criticized for secret financial help to U.S. groups, such as students, involved with similar groups overseas where this government tries to block Communist influence and takeovers.

It can be taken for granted that's only part of CIA's operations, that it spends millions in spies, bribes and subsidies. None of this is new.

Polk told Congress that under a law of 1810 he had the right, for the public, to say nothing about secret spending in foreign affairs if publicity would hurt the national interest. He said this was every nation's experience.

The very first Congress passed a law like that of 1810 in 1790 under the presidency of George Washington who, during the revolution, was up to his neck in espionage.

Some authorities think he was the sharpest man in this field in American history up until the time William J. Donovan became head of the Office of Strategic Services in World War II.

The shock of Pearl Harbor — the lack of coordinated and organized information which made the Japanese attack possible — produced OSS. In turn, CIA was a product of the cold war. Yet, the British and French had organized espionage since the 17th century.

Because most historians skip over spywork, all most Americans remember about espionage in the revolution is that Major John Andre, the British spy, and Nathan Hale, the American spy, were hanged.

But the British were good at it. During the revolution, when Benjamin Franklin went to Paris to line up the French on the American side, one of the advisors he considered a patriotic American was a well-paid British spy.

In the 1790's, when this country sent envoys to Paris to ward off war with the French, Talleyrand, the French foreign minister, refused to see them but sent in confidential agents who wanted a bribe of $250,000.

One authority on espionage in the Civil War recently expressed the belief that the Union side alone had about 4,200 spies. In his special war message to Congress in 1917 President Woodrow Wilson said the Germans had already so saturated this country with their spies "they could never be our friends."

But spies, bribes and informers go away back. The Bible had its share: Judas, for informing on Jesus, got 30 pieces of silver. When Samson gave the Philistines the miseries, they promised Delilah 1,100 pieces of silver for finding out where his strength lay. She discovered it was in his hair and when he went to sleep she brought in a man to cut it off.

Machiavelli made a name for himself with his 16th century study, The Prince, on how, including dirty tricks, an ambitious man could take power. But 1,180 years before that, in India, Kautilya wrote a similar but not so well known book.

It was even more detailed than Machiavelli's, with all kinds of dirty tricks spelled out. It wasn't translated into English until about 1900.

Napoleon had one of the best spies in history, Karl Schulmeister, who got well paid for pretending to the Austrians he was all on their side and then conning them into attacking the French at Ulm, at the wrong time.

The Romans were said to have used carrier pigeons and swallows for sending secret information. Greek history is full of double-dealing. Historian J. B. Bury, writing of the Greeks in decline, says public opinion thought no worse of a man for taking a bribe from a foreign power and considered one who didn't "superhuman."